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Planners Scale Back Site Inspections

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During a breakout session at the Hyatt Insurance & Financial Roundtable, held in September at the Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort & Spa in San Antonio, several hoteliers remarked that meeting planners seemed to be doing fewer site inspections.

Michael Hughes, sales manager, Hyatt Regency Boston, who attended the session, believes that the decision often comes down to time — and the importance of the meeting. “It takes a lot of time and effort to get on an airplane, and to be away from your office and your family,” he says.

That definitely rings true with Christy Lamagna, CMM, CMP, president of New York — based Strategic Meetings and Events, and former vice president of events and operations for New York — based Cendant Corp. “If you're a typical corporate planner, it's hard to get out of the office,” she says. “I know when I used to go out on [lengthy] site visits, I had to get up early and stay up later [when I got back to the office] so I could get my work done.”

Another contributing factor to the shrinking use of site visits is the use of preferred-vendor agreements, notes Judi McLaughlin, CMP, director, strategic sourcing for Maritz McGettigan in Philadelphia. “Preferred-hotel programs will often limit the number of properties that a company chooses, and increase the use of and familiarity with properties included in the program,” she says.

The rule of thumb now for planners who do site inspections is to squeeze a lot more into a shorter period of time. For Lamagna, what formerly would have been a lengthy site visit involving inspections of numerous hotels and venues, followed by a second visit, has, by necessity, turned into an intensive one-day tour. She might bring along a digital camera and take photos of rooms and exteriors — information to use in lieu of a second visit.

Planners have also become more inventive in using their travel time to industry meetings to check out potential program sites. During the Hyatt roundtable, one insurance planner remarked that whenever she travels, she uses the opportunity to do site visits for future events.

Anne Hamilton-Chehab, vice president, resort sales and services for Walt Disney Parks & Resorts in Orlando, says that a site inspection has to offer more than a simple tour. For example, what used to be familiarization visits to Disney have morphed into “Executive Experience” events that give meeting planners a taste of the Disney experience along with a chance to engage in leadership development, problem-solving, and teambuilding activities.

Getting Help

Hotel Web sites are one of the first sources that planners now turn to for site selection. On Hyatt's site, for example, helpful tools include virtual tours, e-brochures, and PowerPoint presentations.

What these kinds of tools provide, says meeting technology consultant Corbin Ball, of Corbin Ball Associates, Bellingham, Wash., is a “first step. In most cases, hotel Web sites give the planner a way to narrow the number of visits they have to make,” he says.

However, accuracy is a factor when using Web materials. One tip that came out during the Hyatt Insurance & Financial Roundtable: Make sure that the floor plan specifications are correct. One tool that can help is the Function Space Verification Program, though which the Professional Convention Management Association certifies measurements of hotel meeting space.

Working with a third party can also help reduce the need for planners to go on site inspections, particularly for smaller programs. Peter Shelly, executive vice president of Scottsdale, Ariz. — based site selection firm HelmsBriscoe, says that for an average, three-night corporate meeting of 175 rooms, planners will often defer to HelmsBriscoe's expertise and skip the site inspection. When it comes to larger meetings, planners typically choose to go on the inspection along with their HB associates.

Hotel Rooms Get Pricier

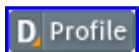
By the end of 2005, the U.S. lodging industry's per-room revenue growth in percentage terms had reached its highest level in 20 years, according to Bjorn Hanson, head of PricewaterhouseCoopers hospitality and leisure practice. The recently released PWC *U.S. Lodging Industry Report and Forecast* predicted an 8.1 percent jump in per-room revenue in 2005 over 2004's level — and a strong seller's market through 2007. Average daily rates rose 5.2 percent in 2005, while occupancy rates, although below the long-term trend line of 66.5 percent, have crept back up to an average of 63 percent, well above the 59.1 percent rate reached during 2002 in the aftermath of 9/11.


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